



The Heart Has

No Wrinkles

Caring for Our Elders

Through Bodywork

When I arrived for our massage session, my client Mary's eyes were devoid of awareness, as if she were there only in body. Mary is an Alzheimer's patient at a special memory-care facility in Westminster, Colorado. She barely speaks, and when she does, her words cannot be understood. When I first began volunteering massage services to seniors years ago, I was nervous around clients like Mary, because communication is so important to the therapist-client relationship. In a case like Mary's, however, communication is challenging and requires an approach beyond words.

It didn't take long to realize that touch was the medium. In fact, it only took 60 seconds of massage to awaken her.

"Hi, Mary," I said. "I'm Cindy. Would you like your hands massaged today?" My question didn't register as she stared at the floor. I reached out slowly and held one of her hands so she could feel some comfort and caring. After a moment, I gently applied cream to her hand and began massaging. A minute later, she suddenly sat straight up in her wheelchair, eyes wide and bright, and said as clear as day, "That feels good!" Then, she shortly fell back into a daze. It was but a moment, but there was no doubt that Mary had briefly broken through the clutches of her Alzheimer's disease. Oh, the power of touch!

Mary might be your mom, grandma, or great-grandma, and she is part of a growing population of seniors who can greatly benefit from massage. Naturally, the therapeutic focus changes with seniors in terms of hands-on work, because healing is no longer the goal. Rather, providing comfort and loving touch is what we strive for and what we know can make a significant difference with these elderly clients.

WHAT DOES TOUCH DO FOR THE ELDERLY?

For elderly clients, touch can awaken, comfort, and soothe. It improves blood circulation, which is essential for inactive individuals. It can improve balance and coordination with increased body awareness, helping your loved one's ability to avoid falls and injuries, and it can improve joint mobility and ease the pain of arthritis; whenever pain is reduced,



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Studies have shown that even a brief massage can produce a relaxation response in older adults living with dementia.

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21131675



The population of US citizens over age 65 is projected to increase from 14.5 percent in 2014 to 21.7 percent by 2040, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging.

www.aoa.acl.gov/Aging_Statistics/index.aspx

feelings of sadness and depression are naturally reduced as well. Massage also works directly with the nervous system in many ways, bringing a greater sense of peace and ease. And simply being in the company of someone who wants to offer loving touch adds icing to the cake.

HOW DO YOU FIND THE RIGHT PRACTITIONER?

While in some care facilities there is no specific training required to offer geriatric massage aside from being a licensed massage therapist, it is best to ask the practitioner if they have been specifically trained in working with the elderly. There are varying levels of care needed within this population.

For some residents, they might be able to receive a table massage in their room, and there would be no additional training necessary for the practitioner. But, with more fragile conditions and older, inactive residents, more careful touch needs to be applied and creative positioning utilized (e.g., offering massage while the client is in a wheelchair or even a hospital bed). It's important to find a practitioner who meets your loved one's individual needs. There are many trainings available, including Comfort Touch (www.comforttouch.com) and Daybreak Geriatric Massage Institute (www.daybreak-massage.com).

The most valuable way to know if you have found the right practitioner is how receptive your loved one is to them. If the massage feels good, and your loved one enjoys the company, you've hit the mark.

ARE THERE RISKS?

According to Sharon Puszko, owner of Daybreak Geriatric Massage Institute in Indianapolis, Indiana, and a 37-year veteran to the massage and wellness field, "There are very few true contraindications to senior massage. In actuality, it is more a matter of appropriate touch. Massage does not always have to be therapeutic; it can also simply be tender, loving care." Because massage can be applied in so many different ways, at different depths and paces, as well as to only specific parts of the body, adapting to the individual makes massage safe in most cases.


Typically, sessions are short, approximately 20–30 minutes, to avoid overstimulating the individual's nervous system. Deep work is rarely applied unless the individual is robust and somewhat fit.

As with any massage session, every client is different. Seniors need extra care, especially given that many suffer from multiple conditions and take various medications to manage those conditions. Therefore, the practitioner must be informed of all medications, sensitivities, and cautions before engaging in a massage session with this client. In a best-case scenario, the practitioner will speak directly to the individual's health-care provider to ensure all contraindications are ruled out or managed appropriately.

The most common conditions to avoid, or take caution with when massaging seniors, include bedsores if a patient is bedridden, easy bruising, heart problems, osteoporosis, thin/sensitive skin, and thrombosis (blood clot). Otherwise, the same systemic and local contraindications apply as with any massage session—not massaging anyone with a contagious skin condition, dangerously high blood pressure, fever, or open sore or wound.

MAKE THE INVESTMENT

I'm guessing you want to feel as good as you can during the final phase of your life. So does your loved one. I see seniors who say they don't want to be involved in planned facility activities, and commonly it's because they simply don't feel good. Once they start to feel better, in many cases, they become more engaged. And massage can often help them feel better. I've rarely met a senior who said no to massage; every time I've given massage to a willing resident, they have smiled, shown happiness, and, if they were capable, told me they felt much better. It's a gift to be of service in this way.

Check with the activity director at the senior care facility where your loved one resides to find out if massage therapy is already offered. If it's not offered by a staff member, the facility might have a list of referrals. You can also check your local area for a geriatric massage practitioner at www.massagetherapy.com. It's up to you and me to shed the light of awareness on how helpful massage can be. Let's take care of our elders. 

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Cindy Williams has served the massage profession as a practitioner, school administrator, instructor, curriculum developer, and mentor since 2000. She enjoys the challenge of blending structure with creative flow to provide balance in her classroom, bodywork practice, and life.